

Slavery is one of those topics that no one wants to talk about. And so for us, as Christians reading the New Testament, it can feel pretty icky and uncomfortable sometimes to hear about slavery all over the Bible. Jesus talks about slaves. Paul talks about slaves. Peter talks about slaves.

Sometimes they're talking about the actual practice of slavery. But other times, they're just using slavery as an analogy for something spiritual. Which kinda boggles our minds. Because you don't talk about slavery in day to day conversation. And you certainly don't use it flippantly as an illustration. But Paul does. Often. Right in our Epistle lesson for today, he does.

Partly, he does because the nature of slavery changed between the days of Paul and the days of pre-Civil War America. Slavery in America was always tangled up in things like racism and imperialism and prejudice. There was a lot more to owning slaves than just economics and social status.

Whereas, in Paul's day, slaves were just one rung of society. You might become a slave for many reasons. You were captured in war, you were sold to pay off a debt, you committed a crime, you were simply born into it. None of these had anything to do with the color of your skin or the region of the world you came from.

You were a slave because that's where you fell in the social ladder, by choice or not. And you could have a good master and be content being a slave. Or a bad master and hate being slave. No one really wanted to be made a slave or born a slave. But it wasn't something shameful to talk about.

Paul certainly didn't consider it something shameful to talk about. He says that we are all born into slavery. Now, in other passages, he says that we were born slaves to sin. But in this passage, he goes a slightly different route. And says we were born slaves to the Law.

Captive to the Law. Imprisoned by the Law. Guarded by the Law. This is the terminology he uses. We were born into slavery because we couldn't be trusted in any other job. We couldn't be trusted to walk freely.

Because we're sinners. Because, on our own, we make horrible, horrible choices. Choices that hurt ourselves. Choices that hurt others. Choices that hurt God's creation.

We make choices like eating fruit that we've been told will kill us. We make choices like killing our brother out of jealousy. We make choices like waging war. And indulging in lust. And pursuing greed. And reveling in our pride.

We make all the choices God wouldn't make. That's what sin is. It's foolishly and selfishly doing something differently than God would do it.

And so God put a guard over us. A taskmaster. A slavedriver. An owner. It's called the Law. And this guardian existed both to punish us and protect us.

I mean, that's what a prison cell does. It confines you. Restricts your freedom. Keeps you away from all sorts of pleasures and happiness.

But it also protects you. It protects you from your own choices. There's only so much trouble that you can get into inside a prison cell. There's only so many other people that you can hurt when you're being watched by a guard. That's what God did. He put us in a prison. He made us a slave to the Law.

And so now, when we sin and when we're tempted to sin, there's something that holds us back. Martin Luther says that there are three ways that the Law works. You probably heard them in confirmation class at some point.

The Law works as a curb. A wall. A leash. A shackle. It directly keeps us from doing things. Sometimes that's in the form of natural consequences. When you do reckless things, you get hurt. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually.

Or sometimes you don't. In which case, you still may suffer God's extension of the Law in the power of the authorities. Getting arrested is God's Law at work. Getting a fine is God's Law at work. Paying bills or taxes is sometimes God's Law at work.

The Law is also a mirror. It reflects back to us what God himself sees. It makes us ashamed of our actions. Guilty for our sin.

You may sin in a dozen different ways and never suffer a single direct consequence for those sins. But that doesn't mean you don't lay awake in bed feeling dirty and broken for having committed them. For doing something shameful that hurt your neighbor or dishonored the Lord your God.

And finally, the Law is a ruler. A straight-edge. A measuring stick. It shows us exactly where God wants us to be. And it shows us that we're not there. That we are never sinless. Never perfect. That there is always more we can do. There are always more ways to be more Godly.

This is slavery to the Law. We were born into it. Just as our parents were. And our grandparents. And our great grandparents. All the way back to Cain and Abel. Because there were only three people born on this planet who weren't born into slavery under the Law.

Adam and Eve. Who first sinned and showed God that we needed the Law. And Jesus. Who freed us from slavery to the Law.

Freed us in a very unique way. In Paul's day, when you freed a slave, it was a fairly simple matter. The owner would write a letter declaring the slave to be free. Sometimes they would write it into their will to free the slave when they died. And the slave would leave. To do whatever they wanted.

But that wouldn't really help us, would it? Because we'd still be sinners. We'd still make all those horrible choices. Choices that hurt ourselves and those around us and all of God's creation. Choices that lead only to death and hell and suffering.

To free us from the Law and then let us go to do whatever we wanted would not be the action of a loving God. It would be the action of a dispassionate slave owner. Who didn't care one bit what happened to us when we were freed.

And so instead of freeing us and letting us run off into sin and death, God does something different for us. He adopts us as his sons and daughters. He says, "You are freed from slavery to the Law, not because I've written a letter and sent you away, but because I've made you my own child. An heir to my own household. And I've declared to the entire world that you are free because I love you like my only begotten son, Jesus."

That's what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus was held captive as a prisoner so that you can walk out of the prison of the Law. God's Son died so that you can live as God's adopted son or daughter. When you are baptized into Christ's death you are also baptized into His resurrected life.

And so now you are free from the Law. You are no longer a slave to its demands. There is no curb with consequences greater than the restoration of the Resurrection. There is no mirror that can show you a sin that God hasn't already forgiven. There is no ruler that can show you how little you measure up when Jesus has already measured up in every way on your behalf.

But this freedom is not the freedom that comes from abandoning God and being abandoned by God. This is the freedom that comes from living in God's household. Living as God's child in His home.

And hearing every day from him exactly what he expects of you. And knowing, every day, that you haven't met that expectation. But also believing, without a doubt, that he will always love you.

That he is your Father. Who created everything for you. Who sacrificed everything for you. Who will give everything to you on the last day. And that you do not live as a slave or prisoner underneath his authority.

You live as a son in his home. An heir to the glory of heaven. A recipient of all the love and grace that he has to pour out. And a brother of Jesus Christ, working alongside of him in the kingdom of God. Amen.